THE PROBLEM OF HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION*

By B. B. KENDRICK

The writing and publishing of history manuals has become a business enterprise of no mean proportion. The rewards of success, expressed in professional standing within the guild as well as in pecuniary terms, are considerable. Competition is therefore keen among both authors and publishers. Each author writes a preface to his book in which he explains in a modest way why his contribution is superior to other works of a similar nature within the field. On the covers of the text and in the advertising mediums of the trade, the publisher declaims, in what in modern parlance is called a "blurb," the merits of the new volume. In either the preface or the blurb or very likely in both, something will be said about the interpretation of the facts. It is described as novel, penetrating, discriminating, or by some other appropriate word or phrase. It is a matter of regret that these high promises frequently are left unfulfilled.

This emphasis upon interpretation is a tribute to the fact that we are never entirely satisfied in history with a mere account of events, but must needs insist upon some sort of explanation of causes. A simple statement of the more obvious cause of an event may satisfy the less curious, especially if it appeal to their common sense, which, in spite of the high praise such empirical knowledge has recently received from the successful candidate for the vice-presidential office, is not very exacting in its demands after all. A few examples from Homer will suffice to illustrate this point. That Alexandros should be saved from a well-merited death at the hands of the outraged Menelaus on the plains of Ilium by the intervention of the goddess Aphrodite and miraculously translated to the bed-chamber of fair Helen in high-walled Troytown, appealed to the common sense of the simple-minded listeners to the Homeric epic. That this same Alexandros had made himself the favorite of the goddess in the first place by judging her, albeit as the result of a bribe, fairer than her rival goddesses, was quite understandable on a common-sense basis. The ultimate destruction of Alexandros, his house, and

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his country, was satisfactorily interpreted to Homer's hearers as the natural outcome of the wrath of Aphrodite's disappointed rivals. Likewise is nearly every action of humans as recorded in the great Homeric epics attributable to divine intervention in the affairs of men. But while such interpretation seems to have been entirely satisfactory to the primitive Greek, in fact Homer succeeds only in transferring the problem to a higher sphere. His gods and goddesses are supermen and women endowed with immortality. They are motivated in much the same way as are Agamemnon and Ulysses, Hector and Alexandros, Clytemnestra and Penelope, Andromache and Helen. Like the mortals they display such human emotions as fear, anger, jealousy, hatred on the one hand and courage, joy, pity, love on the other. Inasmuch as the immortals possess human traits, and human events are largely shaped by divine intervention, the Iliad and the Odyssey are interesting documents illustrative of an early attempt to interpret historical phenomena.

So far as facts are concerned, Herodotus's history is in advance of any of his predecessors who had dealt with historical material. The same can scarcely be said of his interpretations. In place of numbers of gods interfering in man's affairs, all the events of human history are referable to the principle of divine Nemesis. If we may by a wrench of the imagination, identify divine Nemesis with a supreme God, we can find in Herodotus a resemblance to the formulators of the Christian epic.

The background of the Christian epic is to be found in the sacred writings of the ancient Hebrews, especially that part of them which are familiar to us as the Old Testament. The writers of the religio-historical stories which compose the principal part of the Hebrew Bible, conceived of a tribal god, whose unpronounceable name was Yahweh and who was publicly acknowledged as The Lord. In the earlier stories this Yahweh reveals himself as much the same sort of god as the Greek Zeus or Roman Jupiter. He is human in his outbursts of anger, his jealousy of other tribal gods, and the relentless cruelty with which he urges his people on against such tribes as do not propitiate him with worship and sacrifice. By the time we reach the age of the prophets, the character of Yahweh has undergone considerable change for the better. He is decidely less cruel, less jealous and is much more of a father to his people than he had formerly been. He is beginning to be repelled rather than propiti-

ated by sacrifices. He is better pleased with a contrite heart and a pure spirit than with the smell of burnt offerings. There is some ground for supposing that he is becoming more than a tribal god, although it is saying too much to maintain that even the greatest of the prophets conceived him as a universal father. It was left to the founder of Christianity to arrive at this conception of him. This is his character as revealed in the new dispensation, or what we call the New Testament. Despite the fact that the early non-Hebrew Christians were evidently profoundly affected by the developing character of the divine plan, it seems clear that they did not conceive of Yahweh himself as a developing god. The god of Abraham and Isaac, of Samuel and Saul, of Elijah and Elisha, of Jesus and Paul, was one and the same and all his acts and judgments were equally righteous. Although he was so good and loving that he gave his son to die for our sins, he was still a jealous and vengeful god. In his name and to asist in the unraveling of the Divine plan and the establishment of the Celestial City, all true believers were justified in their efforts to extirpate heresy, conquer the infidel, and convert the heathen by force or by fraud. Like the gods of Homer, he interposed in the affairs of man. In his name and in the sign of the cross of his co-equal son, maraculously displayed in the sky, he permitted Constantine to overcome his enemies in battle and win for himself the imperial toga. By virtue of his interposition through one of his earthly saints, Rome was ridded of the plague and with similar assistance Ireland was freed of its pest of snakes by another.

This brief and wholly inadequate excursus into the origin of the Christian epic has been made merely as a preface to the statement that by the time Christianity had become the all-dominant religion of the rapidly declining Roman Empire, all history, at least in the western (Christian) world, had already come to be interpreted as a revelation of God's wisdom and power. The classic statement of this idea is to be found in St. Augustine's *City of God,* while Augustine's disciple, Paulus Orosius, exhibited its truth in his *Seven Books of Histories Against the Pagans.* With Augustine and Orosius, all pagan history, that is all history except that contained in the Old and New Testaments, was profane as appertaining to the *civitas terrena,* and was therefore useless except in so far as it served as a sort of chamber of horrors illustrative of the fate of all who were not citizens of the *Civitas Dei.* All history henceforth would be an

account of the expansion of the City of God until its final triumph in the millenium.[1]

This conception of history still persists although it no longer attracts much attention from serious scholars. If we grant that all history is but the revelation by God of himself, we must ask ourselves the question, what is the process? We are therefore thrown back exactly where Thucydides found himself when he began to write the history of the Peloponnesian War. Without specifically rejecting the Homeric idea of divine interposition in the affairs of men or the Herodotus doctrine of a controlling Nemesis, Thucydides undertook to find natural causes for events. Whether these natural causes were parts of the law of the gods or no, he did not inquire. The fact that Bœotia had been several times invaded was attributed to the "goodness of the land," while Attica had escaped invasion because of "the poverty of its soil." And again when the Athenian envoys are defending before the assembly of the Lacedaemonians the course pursued by their state in building up an empire, Thucydides put into the mouth of their spokesman the following words:

> It follows that it was not a very wonderful action, or contrary to the common practice of mankind, if we did accept an empire that was offered to us, and refused to give it up under the pressure of three of the strongest motives, fear, honor, and interest. And it was not we who set the example, for it has always been the law that the weaker should be subject to the stronger. Besides, we believed ourselves to be worthy of our position, and so you thought us 'till now, when calculations of interest have made you take up the cry of justice—a consideration which no one ever yet brought forward to hinder his ambition when he had a chance of gaining anything by might. And praise is due to all who, if not so superior to human nature as to refuse domination, yet respect justice more than their position compels them to do.[2]

In this brief paragraph we have the germs of much of the historical interpretation of our own day. For instance, how many wars have been begun from fear? It was this emotion that formed the very cornerstone of Hobbes's philosophical structure of the state, while interest became in the eighteenth century in the hands of Adam Smith the keystone for the interpretation of all economic activity. National honor as a motive for action of states needs no comment. Finally it is perhaps claiming too much for Thucydides

[1] See article *History*, by J. T. Shotwell, in 11 ed. Ency. Br.
[2] Crawley tr. of Thucydides, p. 50—Everymans.

to place him among the Darwinians and the Freudians, and yet we should pause to note that the words, "It has always been the law that the weaker should be subject to the stronger" would not have sounded out of place in Darwin's discourses on natural selection. Moreover they might be the very language of one of those German Darwinians who found favor in the eyes of his recent Majesty William of Hohenzollern; while "Calculations of interest have made you take up the cry of justice," is quite understandable to a disciple of Sigmund Freud.

Unfortunately for historical science Thucydides had few followers even among the Greeks and Romans. Never again did a historian arise who was at once his peer in the laborious task of gathering and sifting material, criticising his sources and interpreting his facts until we come down to quite recent times. As we have seen, under the influence of the formulators of the Christian epic, history became a subject for edifying discourses upon the revelations of God's power and wisdom and there it remained for a thousand years or more. It is outside the scope of this paper to trace the steps by which history tended during the 17th and 18th centuries to become a painstaking inquiry into the past for the sole purpose of finding out what had actually happened. We are not attempting to trace here a history of history or of historiography. Nor indeed are we endeavoring to summarize the various schools of historical interpretation. It may not be out of place to remark in passing that each age has undertaken to interpret history in the light of its own major interest. This is true of the medieval monkish chronicler as well as of the present-day materialist or pseudo-psychologist. We tend to give history an economic or psychological interpretation because these are the two fields of our major interest. To the eighteenth century *philosoph,* preoccupied in his speculation upon natural rights and upon the laws of nature, history served as a sort of museum where he could find the particular specimens that he wanted to examine. Likewise the 19th century had its own interests and the 20th has its own—quite a variety in fact.

One curious thing about the 18th and especially the 19th century historian is, that on the whole, he served in the capacity of a sort of maid-of-all-work to his brethren in the other social sciences. Speaking broadly it was his function to find facts and leave their

interpretation to philosophers, economists, biologists, and psychologists. This situation has changed somewhat in the 20th century, but until then we must look mainly to the works of others than strictly historians for interpretation. It is hardly too much to say that the 19th century historian felt that he was committing a sin against the Holy Ghost if he departed from the strait and narrow path of fact-finding to wander abroad into the byways of interpretation or of philosophising. If he was so tempted and fell, he immediately lost cast with his former colleagues. One has but to recall the coolness, not to say hostility with which C. A. Beard's *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* was received hardly more than a decade ago by his fellow-craftsmen in the history guild, to realize how much this spirit has carried over into our own time. I myself had opportunity to observe at first hand the perturbation James Harvey Robinson used to occasion among his colleagues at Columbia by his incorrigible tendency to reflect upon the meaning of the whole historical process. Despite their personal regard for him, he was always looked upon as a sort of *enfant terrible* and there was more than one sigh of relief when he voluntarily withdrew himself from among the orthodox and attached himself to the heretics.

Of the non-professionals who have endeavored to interpret history, I think we owe least to the philosophers. Happily we are little concerned now-a-days with Rousseau and his mythical natural man, with Voltaire and his devotion to reason, with Hegel and his spiritual development theory and the three-phase dialetic, or even with Carlyle and his "great" man. These intellectual speculators were more prone than the commonalty to see what was behind their eyes regardless of the facts before them, and we have a right to demand that there be some apparent relation between fact and theory. In the case of the philosophers there was but little.

On the other hand, the economists gave us a clue for historical interpretation that has been very valuable. They undertook to demonstrate that self-interest had been the most important factor in shaping man's institutional history. The hedonistic utilitarian principle that in seeking one's own interest each individual inevitably contributed to the general good of society, was perhaps too naive. Nevertheless it became the guiding principle of all liberal governments

and despite many serious defects it has worked in practice. There may be a better general principle for the guidance of governmental action than individualism, and the advocates of conscious social control are industriously searching for one, but whether they are successful in their quest or no, remains to be seen. That all "natural" laws operate beneficently, however, is no longer a tenable proposition. Hardly had the proposition been advanced by the French physiocrats and endorsed by Adam Smith when doubts were thrown upon it by no less orthodox economists than Malthus and Ricardo. The former's "natural" law of population was, on the whole, a pessimistic law. In general, as is well known, Malthus maintained that population tends to increase in a geometrical proportion while the means of subsistence increases in an arithmetical one. It flows from this that population always tends to press upon the means of subsistence. As a consequence of this phenomenon we may expect to have the poor with us always, bringing in their train hunger, poverty, crime, vice, disease, war, death. Whether willing to subscribe unreservedly to Malthus's law or no, the historian who would interpret the facts of his subject cannot afford to neglect it altogether.

Ricardo's law of rent, based on the economic doctrine of diminishing returns, is equally significant. Assuming an individual proprietary interest in land, maintained in full vigor by the state, it follows that the owners of the earth can secure from the remainder of the population a very comfortable living indeed without toiling or spinning on their own account. What private ownership of land failed to accomplish in the way of dividing society into the two classes of owners and workers, bade fair to be completed by the introduction of the factory system carrying with it the capitalistic control of the means of production and exchange of goods other than those obtained from the extractive industries. Henceforth the formerly independent hand-i-craftsman, would become a proletarian tender of a machine not owned by himself, and attached to his work solely by means of the wage nexus. So far had the industrial revolution proceeded in proletarianizing the lower middle classes by the middle of the 19th century that an intelligent observer might well expect the process to continue until only two classes remained—owners and workers. The scene was therefore prepared for Karl Marx and his significant contribution to historical interpretation.

The details of the Marxian system were not new. As we have seen the idea of men being actuated by motives of self-interest was as old as Thucydides at least, and nearly a hundred years before Marx published the first volume of *Das Kapital,* the idea had become the main foundation of much of Adam Smith's political economy. Contrary to some popular misconception, Marx's doctrine was not the outcome of the utopian socialism of the schools of Saint Simon, Fourier or Robert Owen. Its background is to be found in Hegelian philosophy on the one hand and the economics of the classical school on the other. It is Hegelian in that it is dominated by the conception of movement, development, progress, which takes place as a result of struggle. With Hegel the struggle is for spirtual self-realization; with Marx it is for economic advantage. In both cases it is a result of inner necessity. With Marx this inner necessity finds outlet in the struggle between economic classes. The nature of the class struggle is determined at any one time by "the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange," but it is always teleological in character. It is this fact that separates Marxism from Darwinism. In the view of both Darwin and Marx struggle is inevitable, but according to the scheme of the former it is a result of blindly cumulative causation and is essentially mechanical, whereas in Marx's scheme it is a result of reasoned conduct and calculated advantage. In Marx's view, such was the nature of the struggle then going on in the western world between proletarians and capitalists. It could only end with the ascendancy of the former.

In addition to giving the knock-out blow to those natural rights economists who assumed the general benevolence of natural laws, the evolutionists were destined also in the long run to undermine the Marxian idea that the class struggle was of an essentially teleological nature. Both groups, however, were exceedingly slow in realizing what had happened, but certainly at the present day, no reputable economist invests "natural laws" with a prescriptive rectitude, but as Thorstein Veblen, speaking on behalf of his economist co-freres, wittily puts it, "So far has this animus progressed toward disuse that it is now chiefly a matter for expatiation in the pulpit, the accredited vent for the exudation of effete matter from the cultural organism."[3] As to the socialists, it may be said that the evolutionary

[3] *The Place of Science in Modern Civilization,* p. 53.

theory was making considerable progress even before 1917 in convincing them that Marx may have erred in thinking that the class struggle was the inevitable and efficacious method of adjusting human industry to human uses. What it failed to accomplish in this respect has been supplied by the actual experience of Russia during the past seven years. Few fair-minded men will now maintain that the dictatorship of the proletariat based upon a seizure of power by force, has noticeably improved the conditions of the working classes, although it has succeeded in substituting one set of exploiters for another. It is found, however, that the new set maintain their control by all the apparatus of coercion, mastery and subservience in much the same way as the old set maintained theirs. In this respect it has not differed essentially from the normal outcome of previous revolutionary movements. Although the Socialists may claim that the long run effects of the Russian revolution will be good, this is much less than an orthodox Marxian had a right to expect.

We now know that Marx was entirely too naive, but this is not to say that there is nothing whatever in his idea of the class struggle. In fact no proposition is more susceptible of historical proof than that there is a tendency for various economic groups to become aware of their class interests and to work consciously for the fulfillment of ends which they consider good. An excellent history of the United States, for instance, could be written with this thesis as its unifying theme, and a beginning in that direction has been made by C. A. Beard and a small band of faithful disciples. On the other hand it cannot be claimed that anything like a majority of the American people are actuated by motives of conscious class interest, as the sixteen million popular votes for Coolidge and Dawes and the bare handful for Mr. W. Z. Foster sufficiently attest.

Hence it falls out that while the philosophers and the economists can teach us something about the interpretation of history, they cannot teach us everything. Both have depended too exclusively on logic and reason in their methods, and every historian knows that logic and reason have frequently proven mere whirlpools where the human intellect splashes around and around making much noise but little progress. A great deal may be expected from such sciences as anthropology, biology and psychology as aids to the historian in making interpretations. These sciences are still young and immature

and they have all suffered from over-much popularity, or perhaps I should say popularization, but the genuine scientists should not be held responsible for the outpourings of a host of fakirs who call themselves scientists. Space does not permit of an elaboration of how each of these sciences may be of assistance to historical interpretation, but suggestions should be apparent from the conclusion to which we shall now direct our attention.

Considerable history-writing must ever be a painstaking search for facts without much effort at interpretation. Doctoral dissertations, publications of historical research societies, monographs in general, will necessarily remain factual in character. But history of a general nature, including textbooks, should be interpretative rather than factual. The average person who studies or reads history cannot be brought to any great interest in the subject by a mere recital of facts and even if he could they would not do him very much good. What we need to do is to popularize the great processes of history. To do this I would suggest a sort of formula or method of procedure for the historian who undertakes to write a popular text or treatise. It is this.

History consists of two constants viz: (a) the world of nature; (b) the world of human nature; and two variables, viz: (c) the relations of b to a; and (d) the relationship among the units of (b).

To construct a textbook of history on the basis of this formula requires that the historian be something more than a collector of facts, mainly political in nature. He must be aware of the bearings of natural science on his subject, of geography, of climate, topography, soil, natural resources, the state of the industrial arts at any given period—in short he must ever keep in mind the fact that man makes his history on a stage which is the world in which he lives. Now all this sounds apparent enough, and yet few indeed of the textbooks give indication that the author has kept it continuously in mind. But even more is required. Years ago Alexander Pope said, "The proper study of mankind is man." That historian fails who attempts to deal with man along logical or rational lines, for he is neither logical nor rational. He is a creature of instincts, habits, emotions, complexes, and only rarely is he reflective. This means that the historian must be something of a psychologist and the science of history ought to advance as the science of psychology advances.

Nor can the historian afford to neglect the great driving force of self-interest. Henrick Van Loon's definition of man as "a hungry creature looking for food" is no doubt conceived too narrowly, but as far as it goes, it is true. A very large part of the activity of the human race, of its accomplishments in the way of institutional development, have come about as a result of this great original drive. However much the old classical historians may sneer at the economic interpretation of history, it is here to stay, and while as has been indicated in this paper, it is not the sole factor in historical interpretation, as the Marxians and some of the post-Darwinians seemed to think, it is a factor that cannot be ignored or lightly passed over. Finally, if we are ever to succeed in gaining for history the allegiance of the ordinary citizen and giving to him some of its meaning and sense, we must bring to the subject an understanding of those less tangible human relationships that have found description in the works of poets, philosophers, dramatists and savants. Only in this way may history regain its rightful place as a branch of literature and become a living science.